Treacherous Clergy and Conniving Countesses

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Goals

Previous scholarship has amply demonstrated that aristocratic women in the High Middle Ages played diverse political roles. A study of medieval letters makes it abundantly clear that the authors of these letters – often influential members of the clergy including popes and bishops, all among the most powerful men of their respective periods – approached elite women with all the circumspection appropriate for one dealing with determined and resourceful political agents. Although some scholars have studied the careers of specific elite women, such as Countess Ermessenda of Barcelona, Viscountess Ermengard of Narbonne, and Constance, Queen of Sicily, few have paid attention to the specific political contexts that enabled aristocratic women to wield lordly power.

The actions of aristocratic women and the responses that they elicited from clerical and secular powers varied considerably. Relations between the Catholic Church and the dominant lay powers of the 11th and 12th centuries were often strained, and aristocratic women served as diplomatic links between temporal rulers and the church. Agnes of Poitou, as the mother of the Holy Roman Emperor Henry IV and herself a former regent of the Empire, was sought out by Pope Gregory VII and Lanfranc Archbishop of Canterbury alike as a possible broker of peace, or at least good relations, between the church and her son. On several occasions noblewomen were enlisted by powerful churchmen hoping to bring their subordinates and rivals to heel. Bernard of Clairvaux asked the sister and aunt of the Emperor of Spain intercede on his behalf against the Abbey of Cerezada in their quarrel with the Abbey of Toldanos. Shortly after his election to the Papal See, Gregory VII asked Beatrice and Matilda, countesses of Tuscany, to aid him in his campaign against simony by withholding council from and avoiding contact with the bishops of Lombardy. However, these women were not just useful political tools to be manipulated at will by ambitious clergy: acting in what we can only assume was their own interest, the same Beatrice and Matilda kidnapped and imprisoned a German bishop contrary to the desires of Pope Gregory. Aristocratic women were often capable of exercising power through violence, such as in the case of the Abbess of Faverney, whose subjects required “protection from the oppression and rapacity of [her] agents.”

Cases like these complicate the received wisdom regarding gendered divisions of power in the medieval world. The goal of this project is to further explore the ways in which aristocratic women exercised power, whether it be through physical force, diplomacy, the mobilization of wealth, or any other means. More specifically, the project will focus on the interactions between these powerful women and the clergy, and the strategies that the latter employed in dealing with the former. This still leaves the scope of our project rather wide. Professor Bowman’s ongoing research concerns the activities of elite women who were considered particularly violent by their contemporaries; such figures are useful both in that they can help us as modern observers reconstruct the medieval understanding of what constituted “violent” as opposed to merely difficult or vexing behavior on the part of nobles and women. Violent ladies are also illuminating insofar as they tend to create a bit of a scandal, which in turn generates a substantial amount of literature about their actions and the depravity thereof. Through such case studies we can hopefully ascertain not only the ways in which medieval writers understood violence, but also where they drew the line between the acceptable and objectionable exercise of lordly power and what ideas, if any, they held about the gendering of secular power.

By focusing on the evidence produced by ecclesiastical sources, this research will not only further Professor Bowman’s ongoing work on medieval women and power, but will also inform my own interests regarding religious orthodoxy. In the High Middle Ages, churchmen often relied on excommunication as
their primary diplomatic weapon in their many disputes against secular authorities and each other, and accusations of simony and allegiance to the Antichrist were sometimes thrown in for good measure. It is clear that religious orthodoxy was often invoked in arguments over the legitimate exercise of political power.

Methodology

Epistolary documents will form the bulk, although not the entirety, of the research materials. In part this is because most collections of letters have been translated from Latin into English, making them considerably more accessible than some other types of documents such as court records. Some letters were written with the understanding that they would be circulated to a greater or lesser degree and read by many, reflecting the public or official views of the authors. Others are more personal and adopt a different tone.

The advantages particular to epistolary collections are several. First of all, as the list below demonstrates, they are wonderfully abundant. At the risk of pointing out the obvious, it must be noted that written letters were really the only way to convey complex instructions, request, and exchanges over any even moderate distance. In the middle ages, if you needed to say anything to someone further away than the distance you would normally expect to walk or ride an afternoon, you wrote a letter and sent a messenger. While a messenger might be able to convey your message verbally, anything too complex to be easily memorized would need to be written down. As such, great quantities of correspondence have survived until the present day. Even in cases such as that of Fulbert of Chartres, in which the only existing letters are from the very first and last years of a career spanning decades, a considerable amount of material remains simply due to the huge amount of ink spilled in the course of daily life by anyone of that era with a modicum of responsibility.

In addition to their abundance, letters survive from a great variety of locations and times. Pope Gregory VII wrote not just to his favorite countesses of Tuscany, but to the rulers of places as remote to medieval Rome as Mauritania, Byzantium, and to what was then believed to be the literal end of the earth: Norway and Sweden. Letters do not just represent disparate localities, they link distant regions and establish dynamics between them. Gregory’s correspondence with the King of Mauretania doesn’t just tell us something about Rome and something else about Mauritania; it tells us what Mauretania and Rome were to each other, what tensions were embodied in the vast distance between the two, and what the importance of communication across such a distance was. This example is obviously and extreme one, but it illustrates the ability of the written word to traverse and illuminate distance.

Finally, letters are exhortative. They exist to illicit a response, to provoke someone to take action, to set plans in motion, or to appease an aggressor. In an age in which the dangers of long distance travel were many, and the costs of long distance communication astronomically high by today’s standards, letters were seldom written merely to inquire about the state of the weather or to remark on the passing of the day. Letters were sent to instruct Countess Matilda to warily monitor the Bishop-elect of Lucca, to remonstrate an abbess for abusing her subordinates, to flatter the mother of an emperor or notify a murderous bishop of his and his mother’s excommunications. In this they differ from evidence such as court records and chronicles, which describe events that have already occurred. In fact, the goals expressed in letters often failed to come to pass, as when Bernard of Clairvaux wrote to Sancia, the sister of the Emperor of Spain, in the hopes that she could prevent the Abbey of Cerezada from enforcing its claims over the Abbey of Toldanos. Nevertheless, they reveal what each author thought might work, and say much about which methods aristocrats believed they could use to exercise their power.
Over the course of ten weeks during the summer of 2014, I will survey ten letter collections dating from the early 11th century until the close of the 13th. The total corpus consists of more than three thousand individual letters mostly from the Italian Peninsula, England, the Holy Roman Empire, and France. The authors are almost all churchmen, with the exceptions of Hildegard of Bingen, a churchwoman, and Countess Matilda of Tuscany. I will survey each collection separately along with other related primary evidence, epistolary or otherwise. For instance, my survey of the letters of Pope Gregory VII will be informed by the letters of his close associates, such as Countess Matilda, as well as papal bulls. In addition, these collections will be analyzed comparatively: Pope Gregory VII and Lanfranc, Archbishop of Canterbury were contemporaries, and there is a significant intertextual relationship between the correspondences produced by each.

The survey and analysis of this broad body of epistolary evidence will give us a more nuanced understanding of the conditions under which aristocratic women could exercise lordly power and the ways in which they fit into the political landscape of Europe in the High Middle Ages. Furthermore, it will further our knowledge of the ways that violence was conceived in the medieval era, as well as how ideas of violence and political agency were connected and intertwined with notions of religious orthodoxy.

The main epistolary collections are as follows:

*The Letters of Gerbert, with His Papal Privileges as Sylvester II*, trans. Harriet Pratt Lattin (New York, 1961)


